

Greet Apelles

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Have you ever wondered why dedicated believers in the Lord often have such hard lives? I'm referring to believers who have given themselves totally to the Lord. Over the years I've noticed such folks. Almost without exception they have extreme difficulties during periods of their lives. The kind of difficulties that provoke many who look on with compassionate eyes to ask, "God, why?" For example, one of the most righteous, holy men I've ever known has a son who is an alcoholic. I've known others who had crippling diseases, and the list goes on...

Yes, we have all seen situations like these, haven't we? We ponder the "Why's" of such mysteries in the Body of Christ. I have even heard onlookers ask angrily, "Why doesn't God do something about that?" In fact, I've felt anger myself over such situations.

In these cases the natural tendency of compassionate, loving Christians is to bombard heaven with intercessory prayers for deliverance. That's certainly what most of us do, isn't it? Then, often, in our eyes, the prayers seem to go unanswered. In fact sometimes the matter seems to grow worse. What can we do then? Read on.

Often we rationalize the matter to satisfy our own mind. Such rationalization usually follows these lines of thought: "Is there some hidden sin in his (or her) life..? Or maybe the devil is working him over. Of course, it could be that he simply isn't claiming his victory. Or, maybe he isn't 'laying hold of God' in prayer." If we are in the far reaches of the mind we may think, "Maybe there's a need for deliverance in this case. Or, there could be a curse on him!"

Then when we pray about these various hypotheses, none of them seem to be the answer. We continue in prayer, nothing clicks. The days turn to weeks, and the weeks dissolve into months. We lose our fervency and finally come to the wishy washy conclusion of, "Well, I don't understand...but God knows..." Does this process seem familiar to you? How often have we been through similar processes and came to the same unsatisfactory conclusion?

I have pondered this puzzling dilemma for years. I knew there had to be an answer. As always,

the answer is in the Scripture. In the Apostle Paul's closing greetings to the Roman church he wrote this simple statement, "*Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ.*" (Rom 16:10 NIV).

"Tested and approval in Christ." This statement provides us with a real insight into the very process of God's selection of people for the highest call to service. Does God actually test His people?

Yes. He does.

First let's ask the question, "Why are some people so severely tried while others never seem to have any problems?"

Observation of the Scripture as well as simple logic conveys the idea that the more difficult or higher the call on a believer's life, the more severe the testing process.

Why? Obviously it is because the potential for good or bad is much higher. By way of analogy, the potential for good or bad is much higher in the neurosurgeon, attorney or architect than in the delivery driver or house painter, right? Thus, society demands more stringent testing of these individuals before approving them. And, does not the neurosurgeon, attorney or architect have more responsibility to society than the carpenter or painter? Certainly!

This principle carries over into the spiritual dimension as well. There is certainly a more rigorous testing for a Billy Graham, Martin Luther or Mother Teresa than there is for those who serve on a much smaller scale at a local church each Sunday morning.

It follows then that many of those who are in dire circumstances are in the process of God's testing for His greater works. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, "*...we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel...but God, who tests our hearts.*" (1 Thes. 2:4 NIV).

3 Categories

The obvious implication in the statement "Approved by God" is there are those not approved of God. There are three broad categories of Christians: those approved, those in the testing process, and those not approved.

THE APPROVED.

We see them throughout Scripture. Hebrews chapter eleven lists many of them. There we read of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Gideon, Barak, Jephtha, David and many, many others. We see them in Church History: Wycliffe, Luther, Knox, Wesley, Finney, etc. We see them today, men and women like Billy Graham, James Dobson, John Paul II, Mother Teresa, Bishop Tutu...and the list goes on and on. However, we need to understand that "approved" does not mean famous. I have listed these only because of the ready recognition of their names. There are thousands upon thousands of approved believers of whom we never hear and see. They stand as mighty warriors in God's army. They are the ones on whom He can call day or night under any circumstances and they will respond immediately.

I once heard a story about such a call from the King to one of His approved servants. Her name was Corrie Ten-Boom. Corrie was a house guest in a Christian home. An elderly gentleman, a relative of the host, was also a guest in the same home and he was unsaved.

At about 3 a.m., there was a sudden stir of noise in the house. The elderly gentleman was having a heart attack but he was still conscious. The host and others were running frantically about. "Call the paramedics, make him comfortable." they exclaimed. While looking for someone with some medical training, someone knocked on Corrie's door and told her what had happened. He asked, "Can you do something?" She immediately said, "Ya" as she sprang from her bed. She hurried down the hallway buttoning her robe. She burst into the old man's room in a very authoritative manner. Rushing over to him, she grabbed him by his shoulders, shook him with gusto and asked, "Sir, do you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour?"! Among those who were present that night, God knew He could call on Corrie Ten-Boom. She would do His will without hesitation. You see, Corrie had been tested and approved in a Nazi prison camp years ago.

THOSE IN THE TESTING.

The majority of Christian fall in this category. Many of those in the difficult circumstances mentioned at the outset of this article fall in this

category. But it is unfortunately a sad fact that few have been taught about the Divine Approval Process.

Let me say as an aside that we must understand there are many other reasons for suffering in addition to winning God's approval. Sin is the primary cause for much suffering. Sin has a ripple effect. The guilty suffer because of their own sin and the innocent suffer because of the sins of others. However, since this subject is beyond the scope of this article, we will not pursue it here.

Back to those in-the-testing stage to seek God's approval. How are they tested? The answer is not pleasant. They suffer. They suffer emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Have you ever wondered about the Apostle Paul's statement, *"Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." (Col.1:24)?* For years I wondered about that statement.

The answer is really quite simple. The sufferings of the believer relates to the cross. Each of us has a cross (or crosses!) to bear or Jesus would not have said "Take up your cross and follow me." What is the cross? What does the Cross do to the one who bears it?

The Cross is the dividing point between the world and Christ...between the physical and spiritual...between self-will and His will...between self-pleaser and Father-pleaser. The Apostle Peter stated it this way, *"Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God." (1 Peter 4:1,2 NIV).*

Can you see then how this suffering pulls the believer over into the realm of God's approved? Unwittingly, involuntarily and often without knowledge, the years of hardship and agony dutifully accomplishes its goal. The flesh is crucified. "Self" is dealt a death blow. The only remaining life is the Christ-life in the believer's spirit. Those who observe the completed product say, "He's much more mellow than he used to be. He's different, he's more loving, kind and gentle. And God certainly answers his prayers." They are describing a new person, one

who has placed Jesus irrevocably on the throne of his heart.

THOSE NOT APPROVED.

The unapproved fall into one of four categories: The novice, the unmotivated, the simple, and those who refuse the discipline of His testing. The NOVICE has his day coming. Sooner or later he will enter the "in-testing" phase unless he joins the next group, the UNMOTIVATED. This group encompasses a large percentage of the church today. They are the ones Jesus spoke about in the parable of the sower as the ones who allow the *"worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth, and desires for other things to come in and choke the word."* (Mark 4:19). They are easy to spot. They are spiritually complacent and quite unmotivated. They will never enjoy receiving His seal of approval. The third group, the SIMPLE, is a broad category. Here we find those who for various reasons are not as mentally alert as others. They are those with learning problems, those who are emotionally traumatized, and those who for other similar reasons are not able to cope with the pressures of testing. God's Divine grace covers them.

The last, and the saddest category, consists of those WHO HAVE FAILED THE TEST. It has been accurately observed that adverse circumstances of life will do one of two things to a person: He or she will become either BITTER or BETTER. If a person yields to the discipline of the Lord, he will *"share in his holiness"* (Heb. 12:10). The Apostle Peter warned us against quitting or turning bitter. He said, *"...those who suffer according to God's will should submit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."* (I Peter 4:19 NIV).

Examples From Scripture

Peter's admonition makes it appear he knew from experience what he was talking about, doesn't it? God tested Peter to the very core of his being through his denial of Christ. God tested Jesus when "the Spirit" drove Him into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. In the Old Testament, God tested David by allowing Saul to hunt him as an animal. There are many others about whom we could speak.

All these passed through severe testing. Jesus

won His victory over Satan by standing on the Word, totally relying on "it is written". David passed the test when the Lord delivered Saul into his hands. David refused to touch "God's anointed" and left Saul in God's hands. (I Sam. 24). For myself, and many others I'm sure, I am glad for Peter's initial failure. His failing and eventual restoration provides great hope for me!

HOW MAY WE WIN GOD'S APPROVAL?

Let's look at how one eventually wins God's approval. Analytically, three ingredients are required for ultimate approval. They are 1) knowledge of God, 2) grace, and 3) tenacity.

KNOWLEDGE OF GOD.

It is essential that we know who God is and that he is rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Heb. 11:6) If we have a fuzzy view of God and His Word, or do not quite believe He has the ability to pull us through, then we have failed already. Remember Peter's encouraging admonition to believers, *"...commit [themselves to their] Creator and continue to do good."* (I Pet. 4:19). That statement demonstrates a clear, simple trust in God. It also means that we do not have to have understanding about what's going on. It is enough to understand who He is.

GRACE.

During one of the low times in the Apostle Paul's life, he cried out for deliverance from circumstances. God did not choose to answer Paul's prayer for deliverance, but chose instead to give him something better. He answered, "My grace is sufficient for you..." His grace is much better than what Paul requested for he said, *"Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power [grace] may rest on me."* (II Cor. 12:9 NIV).

If we find ourselves in short supply of His grace, all we need to do is ask Him for an increased supply. He has promised irrevocably that, *"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so you*

can stand up under it." (I Cor. 10:13 NIV). May I suggest that the "way out" is through His grace? Paul interpreted it that way, did he not? An abundant supply of His grace is available for the asking.

TENACITY.

The dictionary defines tenacity as "...holding firmly, cohesive, tough, persistent, stubborn..." Such qualities are absolutely necessary if we are to enter victoriously into His approval. Tenacity is the quality that enables the believer to keep on keeping on when there is no outward reason to do so.

I heard a wonderful story once that demonstrates tenacity very well. Our story teller said, "When I first became a believer, I was full of zeal and energy. Week after week, I was seeing God's power and miracles. The supernatural almost became the norm. Each week I returned to my church to share all the wonderful things God was doing. And each week an elderly sister would usually share just after I spoke. She gave the same mundane testimony every time. In a very calm, anticlimactic voice she simply said, "I thank God for His keeping power." He continued, "That was twenty years ago. Since then I've come to appreciate her testimony more and more. In fact, my testimony today is, 'I thank God for His keeping power!'" The old sister who spoke had a measure of tenacity in her life. If we demonstrate to Him that we intend to stick it out, He tightens His grip on us!

Yes, thank God for His keeping power!

HOW ABOUT 'SELF-APPROVAL'?

Today in both the church and the para-church, we see many who appear to be doing great things for God. Some are. They are the "approved."

However, some are doing "great things" that are not going to stand the "fire test" of I Corinthians 3:13. For many of these "great works" fall into the category of "wood, hay, and stubble." The Apostle Paul went on to say, "*It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*" (II Cor. 10:18).

No, God is not looking for the self-anointed or the self-approved. He is looking for those on whom He is free to place His seal of approval.

We do not know anything further about Apelles, but one thing we do know for sure. He had been through God's testing - and passed the test.

When we are assembled before the Lord in glory and after we have sung through the 'Hallelujah Chorus' a few hundred times, one of the people I want to look up and shake hands with is Apelles...TESTED and APPROVED in Christ!

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